

CHAPTER 6, SESSION 30: THE ENCOURAGING COMMUNITY

CHAPTER CHALLENGE

There is no doubt that Christians need other Christians who will remind them of their identity as ones in whom Christ dwells. We also need constant reminding that we are residents of the kingdom of God. The difficulty arises because so many Christians have experienced condemnation and judgment rather than admonition and encouragement. While the author does an excellent job of delineating these differences, our wounds from being judged can reach very deep, and our own patterns of condemning others can be hard to break.

If your group struggles with such wounds or habits, spend additional time exploring the difference between judgment and admonishment. It may be helpful to notice the role love plays when we admonish someone and contrast that with the self-promotion that often drives condemnation. Challenge the group to consider how we can improve in our ability to admonish one another without being judgmental or hypocritical.

SUPPLIES

- ☞ Two index cards per person
- ☞ Pens or pencils
- ☞ A simple altar space for the “Experiencing Transformation” exercise

OPENING TO GOD [5 minutes]

Have the person who volunteered last week offer their reading as a lead-in to 5 minutes of silence.

At the conclusion of the silence someone in the group may offer a brief prayer, ring a meditation chime, or simply say “Amen.”

SOUL-TRAINING [10-20 minutes]

If you are in a group of six or more people, divide into groups of three or four. Use the questions below to discuss your experience of meeting with an accountability friend.

1. Were you able to find an accountability friend?
2. How did the time of conversation with this person affect you?
3. Have you had any experiences with an accountability friend (or group) in the past? How would you compare that experience with this week’s experience?
4. What resistance do you feel toward having an accountability friend?

ENGAGING THE CHAPTER [30-40 minutes]

If you divided into sub-groups for your discussion of the soul-training exercise, you may regroup for your discussion of the chapter. If time is limited, read through the following questions and note which ones you especially want to discuss, and then begin with those questions.

1. The author opens the chapter with the story of the Clay Pot Church and their pastor Tom Smith. From that opening section what inspired or challenged you?
2. In discussing the false narrative, the author explores how churches lower their expectations and eradicate commitment at the risk of decreasing genuine transformation (pp. 128-29). Describe the level of commitment expected of you in various churches you’ve attended. How did the level of commitment affect you? Have you ever seen a higher level of commitment lead to genuine transformation? If so, discuss what you saw.

3. As the author explains the true narrative he writes, “I want a community that reminds me constantly of who I am and will watch over me with love—which means both comfort and warning—so that I might live a life worthy of my calling” (pp. 130-31). Do you desire such a community for yourself? What attracts you to this idea, and what reluctance do you feel toward this type of community?
4. On a Sunday morning when the author did not want to go to church, he was reminded of his identity. He writes, “I know who I am: loved, forgiven, cleansed, made alive and destined for eternal joy. As we sing, the community reminds me who I am” (p. 132). Discuss times you have been reminded of your identity by your community of faith.
5. Has there been a person or group in your life who has spurred you on to love and good deeds? If so, please describe what happened.
6. The author tells us, “To admonish is to warn, to watch out for and to offer guidance to another” (p. 136). Why do you think we are reluctant to admonish one another? How can these concerns be addressed?
7. Do you agree with Dallas Willard’s theory that if we gave good training to the ten percent of the people in church who are ready and willing to grow, they would grow and their transformation would lead to a change in others? Why or why not?

ENGAGING THE WORD [10-20 minutes]

Have a volunteer read aloud 1 Thessalonians 5:14.

And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them (NSRV).

Notice that there are specific gifts that are offered to people with specific needs, for example, idleness receives admonishment or warning, and encouragement is given to the faint-hearted or timid.

1. Has there ever been a time when someone in your faith community encouraged you? Explain.
2. Have you ever seen someone offer the wrong gift to a person? For example, offering warning to the weak or help to the idle.
3. How do we discern what a person needs as we stand and walk beside them?
4. Give specific examples of situations in which you could practice patience this week.

EXPERIENCING TRANSFORMATION [20 minutes]

Within the chapter there is the beautiful idea that the faith-community has a three-fold responsibility: (1) help Christians recognize what we are capable of as God’s children, (2) challenge us to reach toward those capabilities and (3) remind us again and again that we are indwelt by Christ and we are residents of God’s kingdom. This experience aims to bring these three components into focus.

The first step, “what we are capable of being” gives participants an opportunity to reflect on the lives of other Christians and to be reminded of how other Christians have expressed their identity as a child of God. This step will take the most time and may be intimidating for group members. Emphasize with the group that what they write is for their eyes only. The second step, “holding us to a higher vision” is a time for personal confession to God. The point of this segment is not to stir guilt or frustration with ourselves, but instead to help us realize that as God’s children we are capable of doing wonderful things. The final step, “receiving the peace of Christ” is a simple time of assurance that we are indeed those who are indwelt by Christ.

You will need two index cards per person as well as pens or pencils to write with. You will also need to create a simple altar space for this experience.

WHAT WE ARE CAPABLE OF BEING

Begin the exercise by giving everyone an index card and a pen. Invite the participants to spend 5 minutes in silence thinking about the lives of real people who have inspired and challenged them. These might be people they have known personally or people they have read about. Have participants write the name of the person on the index card along with a few points of how the person's story has inspired them and what they would like to change about their own life in order to emulate the life of that person.

Some possible famous Christians to consider would be:

- ☞ Mother Teresa
- ☞ Martin Luther King Jr.
- ☞ Dietrich Bonhoeffer
- ☞ Dorothy Day

HOLDING US TO A HIGHER VISION

Give each participant a second index card. Have the group reflect on the points from their first index card and write down areas in their own life where they have not lived as a beloved child of God or a resident of God's kingdom. As these areas become clear, each person can write a brief prayer of confession on their card, acknowledging the areas where they have fallen short. The prayers can be specific or general, long or short. It could also be helpful for each person to consider how God might be calling them to live differently in light of the gospel.

As their prayers are completed, have each person spend a few moments in silence reflecting on their prayer, and then have them place their prayer on the altar as a way of inviting God's transforming forgiveness into their lives.

RECEIVING THE PEACE OF CHRIST: WHO WE ARE

It is customary to receive words of pardon and forgiveness after we offer a prayer of confession. Few words of assurance are more powerful than the words spoken by our friends and neighbors. So, now that the group has laid their confessions before God, they need to be reminded who they are. Read the following words of assurance and instructions to the group:

Friends in Christ, we do not confess our sins in order to earn God's forgiveness, because that forgiveness has already been poured out upon us through Jesus Christ. Instead, we have named our struggles and shortcomings, because we long to live lives that are fully grounded in God's kingdom. Nothing can separate us from the love of God. In light of this good news, I invite you to go from person to person and encourage each other with these powerful words:

[name], you are one in whom Christ dwells and delights.

GO IN PEACE [5 minutes]

Conclude your time by having a volunteer from the group read the following quote:

I want a community who will challenge me to become who I already am: one in whom Christ dwells and delights, a light to the world, salt to the earth, the aroma of Christ to a dying world. I want a community who reminds me constantly of who I am and will watch over me with love—which means both comfort and warning—so that I might live a life worthy of my calling (pp. 130-31).

FOR THE COMING WEEK

The next chapter focuses on generosity. The soul-training exercise is applying frugality to your time, treasures and talents, which creates margin to then be more generous.

Finally, recruit a volunteer who will bring a Scripture, prayer, poem or song for the next class as a lead-in to the opening silence.